THE AVP MISSION, VISION & MODEL

The AVP Mission

The Alternatives to Violence Project is a multi-cultural organization of volunteers offering experiential workshops that empower individuals to liberate themselves and others from the burden of violence. Our fundamental belief is that there is a power for peace and good in everyone and that this power has the ability to transform violence. AVP builds on a spiritual basis of respect and caring for self and others, working both in prisons and with groups in communities around the world.

The AVP Vision

We are working toward the creation of a nonviolent society. Our goal is to reduce the level of violence by reducing the need that people feel to resort to violence as a solution. Our process uses the life experience of participants as a learning resource, drawing on that experience to deal constructively with the violence in themselves and in their lives. We do our training where violence is found: in our prisons and in our communities, acknowledging that not all violence is physical.

The AVP Model

"We learn by experience."

The AVP program teaches through experiential learning with a minimum of lecture. AVP workshops consist of a series of structured experiences or "learning activities." Intellectual knowledge is generally not very helpful in the midst of conflict, but practicing nonviolent solutions to conflicts that have been previously experienced is helpful. This is done through role plays, a key focus of AVP workshops: they help participants discover new ways to deal with conflict nonviolently by both participating in and observing role plays.

"The best way to ruin a program is to require people to attend it."

A fundamental requirement is voluntary participation in the program on both an individual and institutional level. When the program is required or imposed by others, it is probably doomed to failure. Our workshops are about personal growth, and people can only grow when they choose to do so themselves. Our workshop facilitators are almost always volunteers, and we expect our participants to be volunteers also.

Sometimes, in spite of our best efforts to prevent coercion or the appearance of coercion, prison inmates register in our workshops because they are, or believe they are, under institutional pressure to do so as a condition for parole. We find that this "motive" does not prevail for long. In our opening talks and discussion of the Community Agreements, we stress that this is a workshop for volunteers, and if anyone is there because they have been made to be there by anyone else, they can leave now without consequences. Because of the experiential approach, participants usually decide very early in the workshop that they have more to gain from an AVP workshop than a certificate for their parole file. From that point on, they become volunteers in earnest.

"The process works by itself."

Over a period of years, AVP has evolved a structure, a process and a set of learning activities for workshops that work. If the facilitators stick to the process, the process will work. AVP seeks to develop skilled facilitators, but the team support and the very well thought out process results in an experience that is effective and growth-producing for everyone, even if facilitators are still refining their skills.

"The way for the program to grow is to train new facilitators. The rest will take care of itself."

Much of AVP's growth and success is the result of empowering people and training them to be facilitators. We do not have "star" facilitators. We have a team model which discourages this style of leadership and insists that no one conduct an AVP workshop alone, not only because such leadership encourages "stardom" but also because it fails to model the team cooperation that we consider essential for teaching cooperative behavior patterns. One of the key functions of our facilitating team "leaders" is to help other members of the team become better facilitators by encouraging decision-making as a team.

"We believe that people learn to be facilitators by facilitating."

Our basic training program consists of three workshops: the Basic Workshop, which focuses on affirmation and self-esteem, community, cooperation, basic conflict management skills and Transforming Power; the Advanced Workshop, which goes into more depth about consensus decision-making and exploration of specific topics of interest to the participants (fear, anger, forgiveness, man-woman relationships, among others). The third is the Training for Facilitators Workshop, which teaches people how to facilitate the Basic Workshop. After this, they are prepared to serve as apprentice facilitators on workshop teams, and they can begin to learn facilitation experientially by being facilitators. Incarcerated people must take the first two workshops to be eligible for the Training for Facilitators. Outside candidates sometimes are allowed to postpone an Advanced Workshop if they find the three consecutive levels too heavy a demand on their time and may not be able to continue the training program. But anyone, incarcerated person or outsider, who wishes to become an AVP facilitator, is required to participate in an Advanced Workshop before facilitating workshops.

We also offer Special Topic Advanced Workshops, which focus more deeply on a violence-related topic, usually one introduced in the advanced workshop. The topic is chosen by the workshop facilitators and prepared ahead of time, and the focus goes deeper than is possible in the Advanced Workshop. It is worth noting that this AVP journey is not just arriving at a set of techniques and "answers" but is an ongoing learning opportunity which will carry on throughout our lives.

"We walk our talk."

AVP is not just a set of exercises. As facilitators we set out to be role models of what the group is learning, both in who we are and how we work together. Part of AVP facilitation is to take responsibility for the communication of our feelings and for our continued personal learning, both within the workshops and in our personal lives.

"In a successful Training for Facilitators Workshop, the facilitators will find their role being as "coaches" rather than "teachers" or "leaders."

The goal of this workshop is empowerment: the facilitators do not empower others by constantly exercising tight control. For the purpose of training facilitators, the workshop facilitators are asked to become coaches while the participants try their hand at playing the game. If the coaching is well done, the game will be well played.

"The program is blessed with good training manuals."

In the beginning, AVP flourished and grew miraculously, even though there was little structure and there were no adequate training manuals to use. The underlying philosophy of AVP was (and is) very different from the average organizational philosophy. Drawing on human relations training and their own ongoing experience, early AVP facilitators wrote their own training materials using the creativity of volunteers. Developed in this way, the manuals have become an organic part of the AVP experience. Every facilitator now has a clear, well-written, training manual that he or she can rely on and even may have contributed to. The manuals are in a constant state of evolution and updating with creative ideas. Every facilitator may contribute to this process as she or he strives to produce high-quality workshops; this is backed up by an online resource of manuals and exercises (see the appendix 3, page 240 for other resources).

"In our organization, power seeps up; it does not trickle down."

Our organizational model is one of building from the grass roots up. This was the approach taken by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. We believe this approach is essential to nonviolence training.

Our decision-making process is one of consensus. We are wary of too much formalization, and we resist anything that might encourage a hierarchy among us. AVP is not about hierarchy; it is about community, acknowledging and encouraging the potential of all of us to grow and develop and working together by agreement and without coercion. AVP is measured and tested by its adherence to these values. If it loses sight of them, it will have failed in its mission, no matter how brilliantly it succeeds by any other standards.

"The true source of nonviolence is spiritual power.

We call this Transforming Power."

AVP facilitators recognize it takes more than mere techniques and skits to defuse violence; it is about finding the power to change our own attitudes and behaviors. This power is found in all spiritual beliefs, including Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Native American and Buddhist traditions. We have facilitators who follow all of these (and other) spiritual paths and some who do not ascribe to any particular belief. We avoid promoting any religious doctrine in our workshops, but this does not prevent individuals from sharing about their own sacred experience from their perspective. Facilitators seek to embody their own spiritual power as an important element of their lives. However, the workshop is not a place to promote or preach any particular dogma or belief as each person will have his or her own experience of the sacred.

"Local coordinators."

Our system of workshop coordinators for each institution or community is essential to making the program work. The coordinator is a volunteer who organizes workshop teams and arranges workshop schedules with the institution or in the community for which they are responsible. Most coordinators are lead facilitators/team leaders who lead by example. They conduct many workshops themselves and invite others to do the same. The local coordinator stays in contact with the wider AVP community to ensure the program stays true to the values of AVP.

"The AVP program is a "win-win-win" model."

The participants, whether in prison or in the community, win because they get the training and supportive community they need to cope with violence, both their own and others. The AVP facilitators win because they have an opportunity to improve their leadership skills and get new insights about themselves, other people and a nonviolent life. Prison administrators and staff win by hosting a program that will improve the level of cooperative and nonviolent behavior in their institutions, making their jobs more rewarding. Communities win and community life is enhanced when their members learn new skills to cope with violence and to build community.